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ABSTRACT

By viewing women's literacy within the context of America from the Colonial period until the present, it is clear that men have traditionally shaped and controlled who shall be literate and what shall be viewed as literate, both within and outside the educational system. Women's writing from the Colonial period is virtually non-existent, and studies indicate that women's literacy at this time was low. After mandatory public schooling for both males and females began, the gap between the functional literacy skills of the sexes narrowed considerably between 1780 and 1850. Yet even with the advent of women's education, men reserved serious education for themselves. Although women began to occupy a place of status within the public domain by publishing in most fields after the mid-19th century, women's studies courses still have only marginal status because of the male-controlled educational system. Few women are found in the more powerful positions of public education. Males command a public discourse community of epic proportions, while women have traditionally been restricted to the private sphere. This public/private dichotomy should be replaced with pluralism, which breaks down the male power structure and promotes cooperation rather than control. In the classroom, the emphasis on argumentative discourse and correct usage should be eliminated, and thought given to developing instead a community of cooperation and an awareness of many equally effective ways of communicating through writing. (Fifteen references are appended.) (MM)

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Abstract of "Women and the Dichotomy of Literacy: Public/Private Discourse"

This study highlights women's literacy within the context of America during the Colonial period until the present in order to illustrate how the uses of literacy can be political, stressing how men have traditionally shaped and controlled who shall be literate and what shall be viewed as literate, not only within the educational system but also outside the educational system. Feminists interpret men's control of literacy as a result of a public/private dichotomy established by males. The study explains how this dichotomy is manifest in women's experience with literacy, and will offer pluralism as an alternative to male standards. Finally, the study suggests how knowledge of women's literacy and male standards might affect our teaching in the composition classroom.

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Women and the Dichotomy of Literacy:

Public/Private Discourse

Like virtually everything, literacy has its cultural myths, and these myths, like virtually everything, are ideologically weighted; in other words, written discourse is not simply an abstract system of signs put to impartial uses. One of the most predominant myths in our culture is that literacy empowers people--a myth, I believe, because it is an oversimplification, a denial of ideology, ignoring the potentially different ways literacy empowers people, who they are empowered by, for what cultural reasons they are empowered, and how those who empower allow the newly developed literacy skills to be used.

One possibility for exploring issues of empowerment is women's experiences with the written word; in relation to this, I want to try to unmask the empowerment myth and reveal its political underpinnings by highlighting women's literacy and discourse from the American colonial period until the present. It is my contention, and others' as well, that males have traditionally shaped and controlled most of the ways in which we value literacy, who shall be literate, and what shall be viewed as literate by our culture, not only within the educational system but also outside the educational system; and that they have done so, according to many feminists, by instituting and

sustaining in various forms a public/private dichotomy that has restricted women to the private domain, or, at the very least, has frequently made women's use of literacy within the public domain difficult.

The tradition of restricting literacy education primarily to those who occupy the public domain--namely males--was transferred from the homeland to the new colony, and as a result women's writing from early in this period is virtually non-existant--or if it did exist, no one chose to preserve it. We can point to several significant men's diaries written early in the colonial period--John Winthrop (1630-1649), William Bradford (1630-1651), Samuel Sewell (1674-1729), and others--yet we flounder in naming significant women's diaries. Esther Edwards Burr, who was the daughter of Jonathan Edwards and mother of Aaron Burr, kept a journal from 1754 to 1757--first published in 1984--which has been identified as the earliest record of a colonial woman's daily life written by a colonial woman; yet this journal was written near the end of the period, and Burr was unusual in that she was one of the few colonial females whose education rivaled that of a male's (Karlsen and Crumpacker 5). According to Linda Kerber, a young woman courted by Elbridge Gerry was more typical of women during this period: even though the young woman was the daughter of a state legislator, she was unable to read Gerry's love letters (191). Although Edwards Burr was certainly literate, we should realize that her use of writing skills was restricted to the journal and the letter--or the private--

whereas many of the colonial men writing diaries also wrote and published tracts and treatises intended for the public.

According to Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, no female diaries in New England survived from before 1750, and few female letters (5). As a result she was forced to study colonial women largely through what men had written about them. She found that late in the period women did undergo education: both male and female children were taught reading, but instructors often reserved writing for boys only, because boys would have to know how to keep a tradesman's book. Because men often excluded women from the world of writing, women relied on oral language for the purposes of trade, which limited them to the exchange of goods within their village, while men handled the external trade (44).

K. A. Lockridge also studied colonial New England, focusing specifically on Literacy; he relies on the signatures of wills to develop statistical data, and concludes that a slight improvement in women's literacy occurred from 1650 to 1750 of approximately 15%. Of the women who died before 1670 only 33% could sign their names, whereas 45% of those who died throughout the rest of the period were able to write their names. On the surface 45% seems like a respectable percentage, but when the men's literacy rate of 90% during the same time period is revealed, we clearly see a substantial gap--twice as many men were functionally literate as women (38).

Linda K. Kerber estimates that the gap between the functional literacy skills of the sexes must have been eliminated

sometime between 1780 and 1850 (193). We can probably attribute the closing of this gap to the advent of public schooling requiring female and male children to be educated at the public's expense, first instituted in Boston with the Education Act of 1789. Yet we should not automatically assume that female and male education at this time were of equal status, and directed toward the same purposes and goals. According to Stanley K. Schultz, girls attended school not only fewer hours in the day, but also fewer days in the year--from April to October, whereas boys went year round, except for a short vacation (15). And girls were usually taught in classrooms separate from boys, if not buildings separate from boys (117).

Segregation was supposedly necessary in order to address the different needs of male and female children: male children would eventually enter the public arena of work and therefore need skills appropriate for the role of merchant, minister, public official and so on, whereas female children would be restricted to private, domestic work, and as such, they would use their newly developed literacy skills in ways differing significantly from men. For example, Benjamin Rush, in a speech to The Young Ladies' Academy in 1787 said the following:

> III. From the numerous avocations from their families, to which professional life exposes gentlemen in America, a principal share of the instruction of children naturally devolves upon the women. It becomes us therefore to prepare them by a suitable education,

> for the discharge of this most important duty of mothers.
>
> IV. The equal share that every citizen has in the liberty, and the possible share he may have in the government of our country, make it necessary that our ladies should be qualified to a certain degree by a peculiar and suitable education, to concur in instructing their sons in the principles of liberty and government. (259)

Thus, ironically, the "duty of mothers" was to prepare not only their female children to meet the responsibilities of private, domestic life, but also prepare their male children to fulfill the duties of public life, even though mothers were disallowed any place of power of their own in the public sphere. Women were taught literacy skills not so they could make enlightened decisions when voting, but rather so they could teach their sons literacy skills, who then could use those skills to make enlightened decisions during elections.

Clearly even with the advent of women's education in America, inequality did not cease to exist; men still reserved serious education for themselves. In an article entitled, "Intellectual Character," written in 1858 and published in The Atlantic Monthly, "young man" is the only referent used in relation to the purposes of education; the author excludes "young woman" entirely. According to the author, the art of successfully gaining knowledge involves the following: "The test

of success is influence,--that is, the power of shaping events by informing, guiding, animating, controlling other minds" (791). Women's conspicuous absence from the article implies that during the middle of the nineteenth century influencing and controlling other minds should not be an issue for them, which in turn leaves them open to the possibility of being controlled.

One might think that the story ends with the middle of the nineteenth century, that since then women have gone on to occupy a place of status within the public domain, and certainly this has been true to some extent. Women's publications about women have filtered into most fields: history, literature, psychology, sociology, religion, and so on; yet within academia the women's studies courses which use many of these publications have only marginal status because males still control the educational system. Blanche Fitzpatrick provides statistics indicating that in 1930 15.4% of the doctoral graduates were women, in 1972 15.8%--an increase of only .4% over a forty year period. In other words, 84.2% of the doctoral graduates from 1970-71 were men, and since university administrators usually have doctorates, we can assume that men fill a rather large proportion of the administrative positions. The number of women receiving doctorates in 1980 increased to 30% according to statistics in Barbara Miller Solomon's In the Company of Educated Women (133). But the number of women filling faculty positions in 1970 was 25%, and in 1980 26%--not exactly a dramatic increase. In fact, there has not been a dramatic increase in the percentage of women

as faculty since 1870 when it was 12% and 1880 when it jumped to 36%. Since that time the percentage has gone no lower than 20% and no higher than 28% in 1940.

The same imbalance exists in the public schools. Again, according to statistics provided by Fitzpatrick, the higher up the scale of power, the fewer the number of women. While women teachers numbered 67% in 1970-71, women elementary school principals numbered less than 21%, and women high school principals less than 3%; only 1% of superintendents were women (31). It seems safe to generally state, then, that even today when a female child enters the domain of public education, she enters a place where the uses of literacy have largely been structured and controlled by males; she enters a public arena where often she is denied a voice, and not accredited authority.

When a man, however, crosses over into the private realm of journal writing--the realm of emotions, a place normally occupied by the female--he can be accredited authority and even touted as courageous, as exemplified in the introduction to Michael Rubin's collection of excerpts from the journals of modern males Men Without Masks: "In a world where self-reflection still does not much count among the more "manly virtues," all the men in this collection have also been brave enough to confront the feelings evoked by their lives in order to be more wholly themselves" (xi). Yet we have not defined women as "brave" because they have traditionally kept journals in order to confront their feelings. Nor have we particularly considered women courageous who attempt

to cross over into the public realm of publication, but surely we can describe them as fearless. Erica Jong describes the trauma of publishing her first novel this way:

> The first typesetter would not set type for Fear of Flying. The networks would not run ads for the paperback. I was constantly told that women could only write certain kinds of books, and there was a certain built-in self-censorship of women writers. We were supposed to be shy, schizoid, shrinking, and strange. It's easy to forget how much ground women writers have gained (16).

Even though there has been ground gained, many feminists would describe this new ground as very tenuous, depending on the fluctuations and perceived needs of the market and not on the importance of proliferating the written voice of those who have historically been silenced. In other words, women's issues are currently "in" and so the big, commercial presses believe publications about them offer an opportunity for profit. Lynne Spender describes our publishing heritage much in the same way our educational heritage can be portrayed: "For centuries the male-dominated publishing industry has decided what will be presented in print and has determined its form, content and status" (108).

We should consider how the exclusion of women from male-dominated public life--be it the publishing industry or otherwise--has affected women's self-image. Mary Field Belencky,

et. al. report in their book, Women's Ways of Knowing, that personal anecdotes and research in sex differences,

> indicate that girls and women have more difficulty than boys and men in asserting their authority or considering themselves as authorities; in expressing themselves in public so that others will listen; in gaining respect of others for their minds and ideas; and in fully utilizing their capabilities and training in the world of work. (4-5)

Females see males as authorities and manipulators of public concerns, and not themselves, because this notion is reinforced throughout the culture by various means, including literacy.

Thus perhaps we can say that males--especially white males in our culture--have established a public discourse community of somewhat epic proportions, of which they are the authorities and gatekeepers, discourse community meaning, according to Patricia Bizzell, an "interpretive community...whose language-using habits are part of a larger pattern of regular interaction with the material world" (226). And women have traditionally been restricted to the private sphere and denied entrance into this public community of men's discourse, or in many instances, grudgingly allowed marginal membership when women have made membership an issue.

In Dale Spender's view, the public/private dichotomy can be eliminated by the advocation of pluralism (103). By establishing male standards as the norm, all other possible standards are

devalued, or--as in the case with women's writing at various times in history--denied existence. One standard perpetuates control over anything outside the standard, whereas a pluralism of standards breaks down the power structure, and promotes cooperation rather than control. Spender states that most females within the women's movement are becoming adept at handling more than one reality, since they have had men's reality imposed on them since birth (96). If men did consciously acknowledge that women's experience and values are as viable as their own--even though they might differ--then men would no longer be able to divide in the same way "what is real and what is not, what is right and wrong, relevant and irrelevant, appropriate and inappropriate..." (Spender 96). In short, pluralism is a vital component of equality--not only for women, but for all individuals.

In terms of women and the composition classroom, then, we can no longer divide in the same way we have in the past "what is right and what is wrong." This calls for the elimination of the cult of correct usage, a process that is already underway. We are beginning to find new and more humane ways to evaluate our students' writing, and must continue to do so. We must ask ourselves if argumentative discourse should be--because it has been considered the most mature form of writing--the center of our curriculum, or whether we should de-center it, whether, for example, exploratory discourse--a virtually nonexistant writing form now, and in many ways a cooperative discourse rather than

adversarial--might play just as important a role as argumentative discourse in our classrooms. We must find ways not only to make room for the private writing voice, but also to accord it equal status with the public writing voice, and we must find ways to allow students to feel secure enough, to feel safe enough, to allow their private concerns to be made public through writing. Finally, we must somehow learn how we can help our students to responsibly discover their own discourse needs, while at the same time fostering a community of cooperation and an awareness of many equally effective ways of communicating through writing. These changes, I believe, are ones that will benefit not only women but also men, and, more generally, communication.

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